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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: OSCE SEES IMPROVEMENT IN HUMAN RIGHTS

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: OSCE sees an improvement in human rights, in the attitude of the government toward human rights, and in the ability of the OSCE Ashgabat Center to do business, since Berdimuhamedov came to power in early 2007. For the first time ever, government officials have been able to travel abroad for OSCE-sponsored training, and the Turkmenistan government has been willing to cooperate with ODIHR. Most importantly, while all impediments have not disappeared, OSCE's ability to work with and provide services to ordinary people has increased tremendously. OSCE's civil society work has expanded and local residents are no longer routinely hindered by the government from participating. END SUMMARY.

13. (SBU) The OSCE has noted an improvement in human rights, as well as the Turkmenistan government's attitude toward human rights, since President Berdimuhamedov came to power. According to Ashgabat OSCE Center Human Dimensions officer Benjamin Moreau, cooperation between OSCE and the Turkmen government has blossomed over the past nine months. For example, in 2006 OSCE was able to hold only one seminar on the general topic of understanding human rights. In 2007, OSCE has held four seminars teaching human rights standards to judges and prosecutors. Over 80 people participated in the four seminars. In addition, OSCE has started a human rights course in one of the universities. Approximately 40 second- and third-year students in the international law, law, and diplomacy programs, as well as professors, are in the course.

EXCHANGES/VISITS

14. (SBU) Travel and exchanges have also expanded, Moreau said. In fact, for the first time since 1999, Turkmenistan officials have participated in overseas seminars. A total of 14 government officials attended various OSCE seminars, including six from the Ministry of Education. Four

parliamentarians recently went to Berlin to learn how the Bundestag functions and to learn more about local self-governance in Germany. Moreau said OSCE hopes to expand cooperation with parliament. He believes the role of that body may be evolving, because Turkmenistan government contacts have said there are plans to double the size of the body (to 100 members) by the 2008 parliamentary elections. A number of OSCE officials have visited Turkmenistan, including, for the first time ever, two separate ODIHR delegations.

¶5. (SBU) In another major change from the past, Moreau said, the Turkmenistan government did not object this year to OSCE sending ordinary citizens abroad for training. Previously, government officials would discourage people from going. A record 16 people since the beginning of 2007 have traveled for OSCE training in other countries.

CIVIL SOCIETY

¶6. (SBU) Moreau said 2007 marked the first time OSCE was not prevented or hindered by the government from providing civil society training. In the past, security officials would actually stop invitees from attending. OSCE's three resource centers have been able to expand their courses from English and computer literacy to now include leadership-skills training, human rights, and healthy living. Most notably, Moreau said, the Turkmenistan Red Crescent Society has proposed several joint projects, including one on HIV/AIDS.

LEGAL CONSULTATIONS

¶7. (SBU) Moreau said the OSCE Center continues to receive complainants regarding human rights issues on a daily basis

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and to provide advocacy. However, the number of drop in cases has decreased. (NOTE: Both Post and the UK Embassy have also noted a marked decrease in the number of people seeking our assistance on human rights cases. END NOTE.) At the same time, there are fewer barriers to potential clients, although monitoring of who comes and goes continues. Moreau said the government has responded to a majority of diplomatic notes sent regarding cases, unlike in the past. In 2007, the OSCE Center has provided 906 legal consultations to 200 people. A freedom of movement case involving the family of former Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers for Financial Affairs and Central Bank Chairman Orazov, who was fired for embezzlement and fled the country, was positively resolved, and they were able to leave the country.

HOPES FOR 2008

¶8. (SBU) The Turkmenistan government has accepted OSCE's proposed 2008 plan of activity. ODIHR has also submitted, for the first time, a plan of activity to the government and is awaiting a response. Moreau said Berdimuhamedov had agreed orally to cooperation with ODIHR, and so OSCE would see if that translates into action.

¶9. (SBU) COMMENT: While Turkmenistan has a long way to go to reach "international standards" on human rights, the changes noted by OSCE are a positive sign that while the steps are slow, they appear to be in the right direction. It is important for the United States and other Western countries to encourage Turkmenistan's changes and provide the necessary assistance to keep things on the right track. END COMMENT.
HOAGLAND